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## JAPANESE LACQUERS.



IN some comments on Japanese lacquer a month ago we referred to the general ignorance that prevails concerning this thoroughly artistic species of Oriental work. Its manufacture is peculiar to the East, and the study of it is so fascinating that one can easily understand a person who is not ordinarily a bric-à-brac hunter becoming an enthusiastic collector of these rarities of delicate handicraft. In presenting this month several illustrations of lacquer ware, well calculated to delight the hearts of connoisseurs, we are glad of the opportunity to add some details, derived in part from an interesting account of the lacquers of Japan by Mr. Maéda, who represented that country at the Paris Exposition of 1878. The substance employed in the manufacture of lacquer is the product of the *Rhus vernicifera*, a tree belonging to the family of *Anacardiaceæ*, which attains in six or eight years a height of from twenty to twenty-five feet. Having reached maturity at this age, horizontal incisions, six inches long, are made in the trunk about thirty inches apart. In the middle of each of these a circular opening is pierced to provoke the issue of the crude lacquer or varnish, which is collected in an iron spatula. The branches of the tree may also be cut and put in water for about three weeks, the sap being extracted from them by means of incisions. The best varnish is that gathered from the end of July to the middle of September. As it leaves the tree it is of a dull white color, and much resembles cream; exposed to the light and air it soon turns brown, and finally becomes almost entirely black. So venomous is it that the workmen cover their faces and hands with grease to prevent the poison from entering through the pores of the skin. It is employed sometimes alone in its natural state and sometimes mixed with oil or certain substances, such as sulphate of iron, vermilion, and various powders, which serve to harden or to color it.

The lacquers produced with these different sorts of varnish are the result of very numerous and varied processes, the manufacture requiring much care. The wood to be covered with the lacquer is delicately fashioned, the interstices being closed with a paste of wheat flour, sawdust, and coarse varnish. Upon this wood is applied a layer of plaster formed of calcined clay and coarse varnish diluted with water; this is covered with a number of similar layers and polished with a smoothing-stone. New layers are then added and polished in turn with a finer smoothing-stone. Finally the object is placed in a wooden box, the interior of which has been dampened with water, so that the lacquer hardens in a dark, moist atmosphere. According to the workmen, this precaution is absolutely necessary to produce the prompt hardening and fine appearance of the object, which has finally to undergo a polishing with charcoal.

Such is the foundation on which the artist works, executing either simple marbling or more difficult and varied designs. In marbling, a layer of varnish, mixed with cinnabar, orpiment, red oxide of iron, Prussian blue, and other coloring matters, is struck with a very thin spatula, to which the varnish adheres in places, producing depressions which are the base of the marblings; successive polishings with charcoal and a mixture of oil and pulverized stone give the work its brilliancy. The regular designs are of two kinds, flat and relief. The flat design is first drawn on a sheet of thin paper, the lines

of it being then traced on the back of the paper with a mixture of varnish and vermilion. This paper is then laid on the lacquer, face upward, and rubbed with a bamboo spatula. The design is thus transferred to the lacquer and is afterward covered with gold powder, the object being then polished as usual. The relief designs are made with a mixture of varnish and red oxide of iron, sprinkled, before the hardening, with fine charcoal powder. To the design thus made are added as many layers of lacquer and "colcotar" as may be necessary to produce the required relief. Gold, silver, and bronze powders are applied on the last layer, while the varnish is still soft, in such quantities that the layer is composed principally of metal. The artist, although having but a very limited number of colors at his disposal, secures a great variety of tints by cunningly graduating the thick-

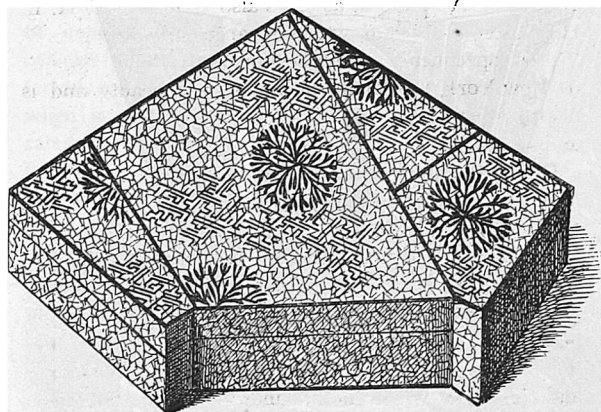
ness of the layers, by employing various metallic powders, or by incrusting in the lacquer bits of precious metal, ivory, or mother of pearl.

These methods of decoration are applied to both black and colored lacquers, and to a kind still more precious called gold lacquer, which requires even greater skill and painstaking. It is made by sprinkling a fresh layer of varnish with small bits of gold leaf; the surface, when shell, and metal, but many lacquered objects are so encrusted with ornament that it is very difficult to determine the base. Even the common lacquers are not considered complete until fifteen or eighteen layers have been applied. Much time may be spent in finishing fine lacquer, and it is even said that among the Japanese nobility it was once a custom to begin a piece of lacquer work on the birth of an eldest son, to add a layer to it each year, and when the child came of age, the completed work was given to him as a birthday present. It is impossible to fix the date at which the manufacture of lacquer was begun in Japan. An old Japanese book, published nearly two centuries before Christ, speaks of lacquer furniture. Several native authors of the fourth and fifth centuries of the Christian era refer briefly to red and gold lacquers, and one speaks of a new sort of lacquer encrusted with mother-of-pearl, but none gives the least account of the process of manufacture. The civil wars that afterward desolated Japan appear to have interrupted the art, but it was revived, and the objects made from the beginning of the tenth to the middle of the seventeenth century, according to Mr. Maéda, "bear the name of *Jidai-mono*, and are greatly appreciated by amateurs." Whatever the true early history of lacquer may be, it is certain that the products of this delicate art have always been highly valued by the natives of Japan. Lacquered boxes were considered the richest of presents, and were generally placed in the most retired part of the owner's house, far from the profane gaze of strangers. Manufactured in government establishments, they were destined for princely mansions, and did not appear in the public markets. Only certain princes had the right to give away saucers ornamented with paintings in lacquer representing cranes and tortoises, bamboos and fir-trees. So jealously was the lacquer-work guarded that hundreds of pieces of porcelain were brought from Japan for one of lacquer that was allowed to leave the country. In a single year eleven ships reached Holland with about 45,000 pieces of rare porcelain and only 101 of lacquer!

Until our own times, indeed, lacquers were rarely exported, although highly valued in Europe. To supply the want, the work of the Orient was cleverly imitated, the famous Martin reaching such perfection that Voltaire complacently declared he had surpassed the original makers. Madame de Pompadour paid over 110,000 livres for Japanese lacquers, and Marie Antoinette's rich collection is still preserved and admired in the Louvre. Since the opening of commerce with Japan, and especially since the last revolution, much lacquer-work has found its way to Europe and America. It has formed a feature at all the great expositions of the last twenty years, especially at Paris two years ago, where dealers and collectors exhibited a great variety of articles, including those herewith represented. The collection of Madame L. Cahen, of Antwerp, comprised numerous rare specimens, three of which are given. The beautiful little gold lacquer cabinet, made toward the end of the seventeenth century, is only a trifle larger than our picture of it. On the four sides it is exquisitely decorated with minute figures, cranes, and tiny giraffes in bits of landscape. The removal of the front shows the interior divided into two unequal parts; on one side are four little drawers; on the other is a sort of square cup and saucer, the latter adorned with flowers, the former lined with silver and decorated with flowers and butterflies; below is another drawer the full width of the cabinet. All the drawers are exquisitely ornamented with flowers and leaves. The box in white lacquer, lined with gold lacquer, is very rare and of surprising delicacy. It appears as if made of bits of egg-shells united by black filaments; on the top are slender lichen flowers, gilded, and geometric designs. Madame Cahen's col-



GOLD LACQUER CABINET. COLLECTION OF MME. CAHEN.



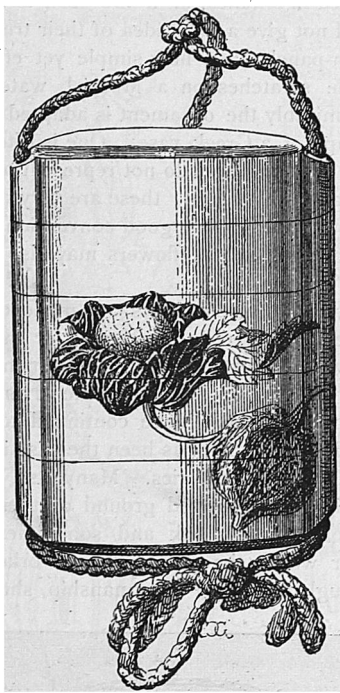
WHITE LACQUER BOX. COLLECTION OF MME. CAHEN.

hardened, is polished and coated with another kind of varnish prepared by careful straining and the mixture of a little gum. Put on in thin layers, this varnish remains transparent and allows the particles of gold it covers to be perceived. In cheaper qualities of this lacquer tin foil is used instead of gold leaf.

Lacquer may be applied to wood, to card-board (which accounts for the lightness of some articles), to ivory,

lection contains a great number of singularly graceful gold lacquer boxes, shaped like eggs or fruits, fishes, big or little, cocks or owls, mandarin ducks or sleeping cranes. Butterflies with outspread wings, sheaves of bamboo, groups of screens, and many other designs are figured on them. The box illustrated is a curious instance of the fan shape and decoration. The "inros," or medicine-box, as it is called in this country, is a familiar object in Japan. Although only three or four inches long, it is frequently made with many different compartments or tiers, each of which is easily disconnected from the others. It holds small pills, lozenges, or pellets of perfume, and is strung to the girdle by a netsuké or toggle. Japanese gentlemen, in visiting their friends, we are informed, often take out from the "inros" a pellet of some choice perfume and drop it into the censer which is always kept burning in the homes of the wealthy. The aroma is thus diffused throughout the apartment, and is sniffed up appreciatively by the company, very much after the manner in which a judge of wines in this country would test the bouquet of a fine claret.

The medicine-box shown in our illustration is one of a remarkable series of sixty of these little "portable pharmacies" belonging to the admirable collection of M. Ph. Burty. It is of smooth gold, decorated with cherry-shaped fruits in transparent husks. Another of these boxes is of black lacquer, spotted with gold and decorated with red and yellow narcissus leaves; a third is of smooth dead gold, with grasshoppers, butterflies, and dragon flies in colored mother of pearl. Among the other treasures of M. Burty's collection, which formed a special attraction at the exposition of 1878, are a tiny



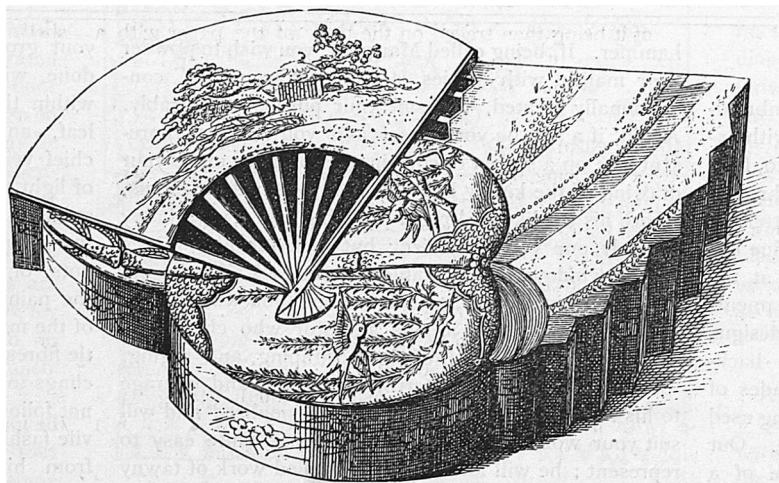
GOLD LACQUER MEDICINE-BOX. COLLECTION OF M. BURTY.

and exquisite gold lacquer cabinet, barely two inches high, covered with geometric designs, and further decorated with an apple-tree in blossom, interlaced with a fir-tree, and, on the inside faces, with little plates; an ivory box adorned with dragons in gold lacquer, and a comb covered in lacquer gilded on black, with flowers, leaves, and branches. Our remaining illustration shows a gold lacquer box in the form of a guitar, adorned with flowers; it belongs to the collection of M. Chas. Ephrussi, also exhibited at the recent Paris Exposition.

Besides these private collections, many remarkable specimens of lacquer work were shown at this exposition by other exhibitors. Great antiquity was claimed for some of these; one box, with a design of a Buddhist divinity in the clouds, was boldly inscribed: "Made eleven centuries ago!" One most striking piece, a large black lacquer box, showed a gray eagle seizing a raven in its golden claws. On another, a writing-desk, appeared a man standing beside a horse, both in colored ivory, except the hands and the face of the man, which were in mother-of-pearl; in the same material were a fan held by the man and a garland of vine-leaves above the group; the design was vigorous and in very thick

relief. The most astonishing specimen of gold lacquer was a box, on the cover of which was a cascade in the midst of a landscape. The design appeared as if chiseled out of pure gold, and the object looked more like an ingot in the shape of a box than like a piece of lacquer.

By far the best public collection of Japanese lacquer—at least outside of Japan—is that of Marie Antoinette, in



GOLD LACQUER BOX. COLLECTION OF MME. CAHEN.

the Louvre, already alluded to. Mr. R. E. Moore, who has just returned from Europe, was much pleased, he tells us, with the collection in the new Technical Museum in Edinburgh, an admirable institution under the auspices of the University of Edinburgh. The specimens of lacquers which this gentleman has lent to the Metropolitan Museum of Art have considerable interest. They consist of almost thirty fine examples of such medicine-boxes as we have alluded to, illustrating a great variety of treatment in decoration; a small square box of pure gold avanturine lacquer decorated with branches of blossoms of the Prunus tree; a section-box, with cover over all, in black and gold lacquer, decorated with the arms of the Tocogawa family, and a square box with tray in Japanese pure gold and avanturine lacquer, decorated with vignettes of various curious designs, with borders of inlaid particles of gold. Mr. Moore, it may be remembered, bought entire the remarkably fine collection of lacquers belonging to Mr. Samuel Colman, the artist. It is now broken up, several choice pieces having been sold to enrich other collections. What remains, however, is still very considerable in number and desirable in quality and variety. A piece in Mr. Moore's cabinet, which struck us as especially graceful and unique in decoration, is a box in black and gold lacquer, (about 6x8), with three fish in high relief, one in mother-of-pearl, and the others in raised lacquer of gold, red, and black, swimming among reeds and grasses. The beauty of the composition is extraordinary, even for a Japanese work of art.

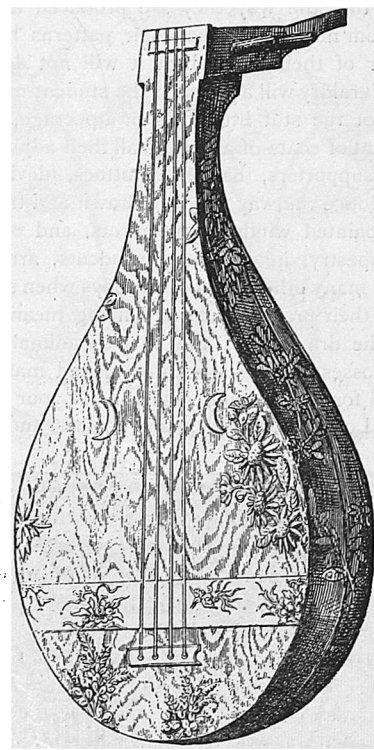
The largest and best private collection in the United States is undoubtedly that of Mr. W. T. Walters, of Baltimore, and dealers who ought to know say that there is no private collection in Europe to surpass it. That of Mr. Quincy A. Shaw, of Boston, contains some pieces of extraordinary merit, as does also that of Mr. H. L. Higginson, of Boston, which is particularly strong in its "inros" specimens. The collection of Mr. Philip Phoenix, of New York, has many pieces of rare beauty, and is distinguished generally for variety and excellence in form and decoration.

One of the finest and most varied collections of Japanese lacquers ever brought together is that lent by Mr. W. J. Alt for exhibition to the Bethnal Green branch of the South Kensington Museum, in London. Some of these objects are so characteristic of Japanese customs that we must not omit to speak of them. There are, for instance, several luncheon-boxes, each in four or five tiers, and with two lids. In their country excursions and picnics, of which the Japanese are very fond, these boxes are important adjuncts, as one of them is capable of holding an entire meal for several persons. The deepest compartment holds the boiled rice, while in the others are disposed preparations of omelettes, cutlets of game or chicken, fish, prepared vegetables, cake, and sweetmeats. The luncheon-box is sometimes in the shape of a tea-jar, and when taken to pieces for use, furnishes a rice bowl, a saki bottle, saki cups, several food trays divided by partitions, pierced for holding the saki bottle, and a shallow bowl which forms the cover. Other objects to which the Japanese apply the use of

lacquer are most varied, including inkstands, smoking-boxes, bon-bon boxes, mirror-stands, fan-racks and cases, and those queer little hats which are balanced on the head with silk pads, and tied under the chin with bands and strings.

It is worthy of note that while the most brilliant period of the art of lacquer manufacture is conceded to have been from the middle of the seventeenth to the end of the eighteenth century, there has been a revival of this work within a few years, and magnificent specimens of unusual size have been produced, such, for instance, as the leaf of a screen exhibited at Paris and illustrated in the September ART AMATEUR. Still, it may well be doubted that the best work of a century and a half ago will ever be surpassed, if, indeed, equalled. There is no such incentive for superior handicraft in Japan now as there used to be in the olden times, when the consideration of pecuniary gain was not permitted to enter into the execution of a real work of art. The demand in Europe and America for the products of the country has aroused the cupidity of the Japanese, who now work for money, and, naturally, cannot afford to devote the time and the care to their tasks that they used to give when they were

executed for the glory of the craft and for their own personal distinction. The old lacquer of Japan is almost indestructible. Not only can it not be easily scratched, but it may be soaked in water for months, and even years, and submitted to other rough usage, which would be ruin to similar objects of European or American manufacture, and lose not a jot of its beauty. The foundation is generally of wood, but no degree of atmospheric moisture or heat or cold could cause it to warp or swell. Here is an interesting illustration: In 1874, the French steamer "Nile" was sunk off the coast of Japan in 25 fathoms of water. After remaining thus submerged for eighteen months, about two hundred cases of the cargo were brought up from the wreck, and it was found that those containing lacquer, although filled with water, had their contents absolutely undamaged. We have seen in New York some of these very



GOLD LACQUER GUITAR-SHAPED BOX. COLLECTION OF M. EPHRUSSI.

pieces, and we can say that there is not a scratch or blemish on the lacquer, and the metallic decorations are wholly free from even a suspicion of tarnish.

MR. G. L. FEUARDENT recently picked up for a trifling sum a very ancient and beautifully carved little block of ivory representing a Japanese priest absolving the devil. His Satanic majesty has the traditional monster's face, and three toes only on each foot and three fingers only on each hand. He kneels before the priest in abject penitence, while the holy man saws off his horns.